



Written Testimony

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“The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and Water Management in Florida”

Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment

House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

September 24, 2020

Good morning. I’m Noah Valenstein, and I have the pleasure of serving as the Secretary for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Thank you, Chairwoman Napolitano, Ranking Member Westerman, and subcommittee members, for hosting this hearing on “The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and Water Management in Florida”, and for the invitation to speak here today. It’s great also to see our Committee members from Florida, Representatives Webster, Wilson, Mast, Mucarsel-Powell, and Spano.

Over the past two years, the State of Florida and many partners committed to environmental protection have been able to make great strides in our efforts to advance water quality improvements across our state, especially expediting water projects for restoration of the greater Everglades ecosystem. Many of these steps forward are the direct result of momentum provided by Governor DeSantis and strengthened partnerships between state and federal government and other stakeholders.

After the governor took office in January of 2019, he issued a historic executive order that provided the framework for significant action with regard to water quality and Everglades restoration. The governor also announced his intention to secure a record \$2.5 billion dollars in funding for these purposes across his first term, which was successfully approved by the Florida legislature at a recurring \$625 million dollars over the past two years.

Governor DeSantis has been laser-focused on promoting water management that not only sustains flood protection and water supply, but also improves water quality and supports desirable vegetation growth and ecosystem responses. Demonstrating his strong commitment to solving Florida’s water challenges, he appointed the first state-level Chief Science Officer anywhere in the United States. Florida’s Chief Science Officer also chairs a team of leading scientists from across the state on the Blue-Green Algae Task Force, which the Governor created to generate effective strategies and solutions to prevent, mitigate, and respond to harmful algal blooms in Lake Okeechobee and surrounding watersheds.

The task force sent its first set of recommended policy changes to the governor last year, which ultimately resulted in the unanimous passage of Senate Bill 712, known as the Clean Waterways Act, signed into law this June.

The legislation includes increased regulations and oversight for stormwater and wastewater infrastructure, additional methods for assessing agricultural producers, the transfer septic system oversight from the Florida Department of Health to the Department of Environmental Protection, and the regulation of septic systems as sources of nutrients for the first time in Florida’s history. Additionally, the governor signed an Environmental Accountability Bill



increasing penalties across the board by 50% for all environmental crimes and allowing DEP to levy fines on crimes as they're happening.

More than ever, Floridians have united around the protection of their water resources, and DEP is committed to successfully implementing the most comprehensive water quality legislation that Florida has seen in over a decade.

Unfortunately, all of these efforts cannot guarantee an end to devastating releases from Lake Okeechobee. Army Corps water management policies and largescale water infrastructure and storage are critical elements to minimizing the risk of future detrimental discharges.

Under the governor's direction, the state has also been leading the effort to expedite critical Everglades restoration projects. With the South Florida Water Management District working hand-in-hand with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, we've been able to accelerate multiple projects focusing on water storage, dispersal, and watershed management, all aimed at sending more water south to the Everglades and restoring the natural flow of water in South Florida. This includes work on the Central Everglades Planning Project and Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir, the C-44 Reservoir and Stormwater Treatment Area, the Caloosahatchee C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir, and the Tamiami Trail Next Steps and Old Tamiami Trail Removal.

Some of these projects will be completed within the next three to four years, and the rest are already moving ahead of schedule. The Corps has also nearly finished rehabilitation of the Herbert Hoover Dike, an incredibly vital project for South Florida.

Florida has also been incredibly fortunate to receive historic federal funding specifically for South Florida Everglades Restoration – at \$235 million in the Fiscal Year 2020 and an historic \$250 million in President Trump's FY 2021 budget request that we are confident our Congressional delegation will fulfill through the congressional appropriations process.

With this increased funding, not only have we been able to move forward on additional Everglades restoration projects, but we've also been able to establish certainty that these projects will be funded and completed in the near future. Combined with \$625 million in state funding, the total funding for Everglades restoration and water quality investments across the state in this fiscal year is almost one billion dollars – an unprecedented amount – and a sign of the impact of improved state and federal cooperation and a mutual dedication to Florida's environment.

The Everglades is one of America's national treasures, and they're unlike anywhere else in North America. In addition to the system's uniqueness and intrinsic value, the Everglades serves as habitat for a suite of endangered species of plants and animals, helps sustain drinking water to more than 8 million Floridians, and provides water quality benefits that form the basis of our local economies and ways of life.

The Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, and this subcommittee in particular, are integral to the success of Everglades restoration, and by extension water management in and around Lake Okeechobee. Your indispensable efforts to authorize South Florida Ecosystem Restoration projects as part of your biennial development and consideration of Water Resources Development Act legislation sets the stage for all the design, construction, and operational work



that follows. We are optimistic about the passage of WRDA 2020 this year which we hope will include:

- at least one new project authorization to restore the Loxahatchee River Watershed;
- two post authorization change report authorizations to account for important modifications to the Caloosahatchee C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir and C-111 South Dade; and most importantly
- bipartisan language from the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee to clarify Section 1308 of WRDA 2018 to direct the Corps to carry out construction of the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir as part of the Central Everglades Planning Project at the funding levels and expedited timeline developed and approved in the South Florida Water Management District's Sec. 203 Post Authorization Change Report.

These WRDA provisions are of fundamental importance to maintaining momentum as we seek to advance the most ambitious ecosystem restoration project in the history of mankind. They will also greatly enhance our operational flexibility to manage water across South Florida.

While we still have significant and difficult work in front of us, we must not discount the important progress we've made, especially over the last two years. Where we stand today, the restoration of America's Everglades is a shining example of what federal, state, tribal, and local governmental partners cooperating effectively can do in service to a shared cause, no matter how complex.

So again, thank you to this subcommittee for your ongoing attention to Everglades restoration and water management in Florida, and to the Trump Administration and this Congress for record federal funding for South Florida Ecosystems Restoration. Governor DeSantis and the state of Florida look forward to continuing to take advantage of all opportunities to expedite this important work with all of our federal partners.